

Jesus' Victory Over Despair **John 20:11-18; Luke 24:17-21a**

Given the current circumstances, I feel it is particularly appropriate to start this new era with an Easter focus. In the midst of a situation that is beyond of our control, and with our Easter celebrations having been so restricted, the danger is that we could easily lose sight of the significance of Christ's resurrection for our lives today. So over the coming weeks, I want to explore some of the things over which Christ has secured victory through his resurrection? Starting today with victory over despair.

Let's read first from John 20:11-18. The context is that Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb early on the Sunday morning and was devastated to find it empty. So, she told Peter and John who went to look for themselves, and we pick up the story when they have left the tomb again.

[Read John 20:11-18]

¹¹Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹²and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?'

'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put him.' ¹⁴*At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus.*

¹⁵*He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?'*

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.'

¹⁶*Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'*

She turned towards him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher').

¹⁷*Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'*

¹⁸*Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her.*

[Pray]

I don't know about you, but I've been finding the experience of social distancing mentally draining. So much of what I enjoy most about life, and about pastoral ministry, is not possible at the moment. And there is no sense of when this will end, despite some encouraging signs that the number of Covid-19 cases may be declining. It would be easy in such circumstances to slip into feeling down or even depressed. Especially if you have lost loved ones, or are worried about loved ones in hospital; if you have lost your job, or are worried about how your money will stretch to meet your needs; or if you spend too long listening to the news and imbibing the vast negativity contained within it. Add to that, a sense of loss at Terry's retirement, without even the opportunity to say a proper goodbye, and it's hardly surprising if we feel down sometimes. So, it's important that we do all we can to protect our mental health during this time.

But *despair* is something else again. Despair is the absence of hope. And I think there are significant signs that Mary was experiencing despair – the complete loss of hope. It's worth reflecting on why this might have been. Mark 16:9 and Luke 8:2 both record that Jesus had driven seven demons (or evil spirits) out of Mary. Many scholars believe that she may also have been the notoriously sinful woman, who anointed Jesus' feet in Luke 7. It may be hard for us to imagine how her life choices and those demons must have wrecked her life. If *one* demon was sufficient to throw a boy into flames and deep water, or cause a man to be mute, or cause another to fly into such a rage that he severely beat up seven brothers all at once, then what damage must *seven* demons have done to Mary!

But then one day she met Jesus. And immediately she was set free from the prison that her life had become up to that moment. And she knew she was utterly forgiven and completely accepted. And she found a purpose. And she found she could put her wealth – however immorally gained – to good use in supporting Jesus and his disciples. And she found community and love in the company of his followers. It's hardly surprising she developed a deep, deep love for Jesus and a deep dependence upon him, as is appropriate only with Jesus.

But then all that was suddenly snatched away from her as the Jewish leaders colluded with the Roman authorities to have Jesus executed on a cross. Mary stayed to the bitter end, watching him be taunted, humiliated, brutally abused; hearing him cry in desolation for God's presence, struggle excruciatingly for breath, cry out in anguish and finally breath his last. She saw the sword thrust into his side, proving him dead beyond any doubt. And she followed Joseph to the cave where he laid him to rest.

Just imagine Mary coming to the tomb two days later to embalm Jesus' body with spices. One last act of devotion for the man who had given her back her life. Only to find no body there to embalm! She can't even do this one simple thing for her Lord. Even that has been taken from her! She runs to tell Peter and John. They run with her to the tomb. And then they, too, leave. But she can't. This is her only connection to the man she loved more than anyone else in the world. And he isn't even there. She is broken. She has nothing left. Her life is shattered. Her hope is gone. She is in despair.

She looks into the cave and through her tears sees two angels – not that she can necessarily tell they are angels. They ask her kindly who she is searching for. But all Mary can do is express her despair: "They have taken my Lord away ... and I don't know where they have put him" (v.13). She's already said exactly the same words to Peter and John (v.2). This is the only thing she can focus on. Her whole world at this moment is consumed in her loss.

Then, perhaps a faint glimmer of hope when she mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Perhaps *he* has taken Jesus away, and knows where he is. Mary could go and get him! ... Really? Carry the weight of a burly carpenter all by herself? But she can't think clearly like that. She's desperate. She needs to embalm his body. It's all she has left in the world ...

And then the risen Lord Jesus speaks to her. Just her name is all it takes to transform her despair into elation. "Mary!" Suddenly she recognises who it is, who is talking to her. Impossibly, unfathomably, yet undeniably, this same Jesus, whom she saw killed, is truly alive and talking to her. She holds him. He's not a ghost! He has real flesh and blood and still the nail marks in his hands and feet. It's too much to take in and yet it is unquestionably real. No wonder she

rushes to tell the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” He is no longer dead. He is alive again! I don’t believe there could be any feeling in the world that would compare with Mary’s emotions at that moment! Can you ...?

Luke records a similar transformation that occurs with Cleopas and his friend. Listen to their emotions as Jesus unexpectedly, and at this stage covertly, joins them on the road.

[Read Luke 24:17-21a]

¹⁷He asked them, ‘What are you discussing together as you walk along?’

*They stood still, their faces **downcast**. ¹⁸One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, ‘Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?’*

¹⁹‘What things?’ he asked.

*‘About Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹but we **had** hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.*

“We *had* hoped ...” As they’d followed Jesus around the country, heard his teaching and seen his miracles, they’d dared to believe that this might possibly be the One whose coming all their Scriptures had anticipated – their Messiah King who would finally free Israel from their oppression. But then he was killed. Hopes dashed. “We *had* hoped ... but we can’t hope any more.” They’ve heard the report of the women, who claimed that Jesus was alive again, but that couldn’t be possible. And now even Jesus’ body has disappeared from the tomb!

But then the risen Lord Jesus leads them in a Bible study of the Old Testament, opening their eyes to see all the places where his sacrificial suffering and then resurrection were predicted long ago. And their hearts burn with excitement within them as they begin to understand God’s great plan for the world. Until finally, as Jesus breaks bread and they see the nail marks in his hands, they recognise with indescribable joy who they have been speaking to all along. And they think nothing of running the seven miles back to

Jerusalem in the half light of the late evening to share this incredible, wonderful news with the other disciples!

Jesus is alive! It makes *all* the difference. Nothing can ever be truly hopeless again! Despair has been conquered. With Cleopas and his friend, we can see that Jesus' resurrection proves he is who they thought he was – the Messiah King, come to free us. Not in the way they first imagined, but with a far deeper and fuller freedom – a freedom that works from within, forgiving wrongdoing, giving life and hope and peace. A person who knows they are free on the *inside* can never be truly imprisoned, no matter what oppression they may face from outside. That is what has so infuriated so many persecutors of Christians over the years – the unconquerable hope within them! Because Jesus has risen from the dead, we are set free from the inside out.

And, with Mary, we may discover a more personal, but no less profound, truth from Jesus' resurrection. Since Jesus is alive, he is always with us – even now he has ascended back into heaven, because he has given us his Spirit to dwell in us. We know, as Mary knew, that we can never be truly alone. And that is one of the greatest joys of being a Christian – the reality that God is always with us, walking alongside us through life's ups and downs as our friend, even if, like Mary, we don't always recognise his presence.

And, of course, since Jesus has risen from the dead, it means there is hope for us, even beyond the grave. Life, not death, has the final say. Or, even more, as Terry said last week, God has the final say. The future is God-shaped! Hope lives on! No situation, however dark or tough, can ever be without hope again. Because Jesus has risen from the dead. Amen?